

Sandhill Crane

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Grus canadensis* comes from the Latin word *grus*, meaning “a crane,” and the Latin word *canadensis*, meaning “from Canada.” Of the six recognized subspecies, two occur in Arizona: the lesser sandhill crane (*G. c. canadensis*) and the greater sandhill crane (*G. c. tabida*). The Latin word *tabida* means “shrinking or wasting away.”

DESCRIPTION: The sandhill crane is Arizona’s largest game bird. An adult stands 38–48 inches high, has a wingspan of 6–7 feet and weighs 7–12 pounds. The *tabida* subspecies is larger and heavier than the *canadensis*. Both subspecies are gray overall, but some birds have rust-colored staining on their outer contour feathers. Sandhill cranes have very long necks; long, dark gray legs; and chisel-shaped, dark gray beaks with white cheeks. Two distinguishing features are a group of tufted feathers going over the rump and the bright red color of the bird’s bald forehead. Cranes fly with their necks fully extended and legs and feet trailing and visible.

DISTRIBUTION: Most sandhill cranes spend the summer in the northern latitudes, ranging from Siberia, across Alaska and through Canada to western Quebec and down into the northern states. They winter in the southern United States and Mexico. Some sandhill cranes do not migrate, but live year-round in Missouri, Florida and



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Cuba. A large contingent of lesser sandhill cranes from the mid-continent population stops along Nebraska’s Platte River to put on fat reserves on the way north in the spring.

Cranes can be found in Arizona in relatively distinct areas. About 2,500 birds winter along the Lower Colorado River on Cibola National Wildlife Refuge and the Colorado River Indian Reservation. A small group winters near the Gila River west of Buckeye, Ariz. Cranes also can be found in the Gila Valley along the Gila River from the San Carlos Reservoir to the New Mexico state line. About 30,000 sandhill cranes winter in the Sulphur Springs Valley south of Willcox, Ariz.

HABITAT: The reproductive or “summering” season is spent in low-water-level marshes, cultivated land, bogs and wet tundra or meadows. Nests are built in shallow, vegetation-lined depressions in the soil or in mounds of vegetation located in, on or next

to water. Winter habitat is similar to summer habitat: Playas and slow-moving rivers near grain fields are preferred.

BIOLOGY: This omnivorous bird feeds on insects, small vertebrates, plants and grains. Migration into Arizona occurs in September and October and the birds depart in February and March. The sandhill crane is best-known for an unusual dance it performs as a courtship ritual. This spectacular dance includes head bobs,

exaggerated bowing and leaps into the air with outstretched wings. A sandhill crane reaches reproductive age at 3–5 years and can live 20 or more years in the wild. Paired cranes are monogamous, but if a mate is lost, the survivor will select another mate as necessary. Cranes typically have poor reproductive success in the first few attempts. Even though success improves with age and experience, nest success is low and young birds remain vulnerable to coyotes and periods of dry environmental conditions. Adults typically lay two eggs, but it is rare for both young (known as colts) to survive the first year.

STATUS: Arizona winters over 30,000 sandhill cranes and their population status is stable. Arizona has had a sandhill crane hunt since 1982. Harvest is less than 300 birds annually.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: There are no special management needs for sandhill cranes as long as key habitats are protected from development. 🦋

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